



COASTAL AREA



PIEDMONT AREA



MOUNTAIN AREA

Discover O Wild

Virginia's Birding and Wildlife Trail Celebrates Five Years

by Martha W. Steger
illustrations by Spike Knuth

In the commonwealth's long history of firsts, its birding and wildlife trail is its most recent claim to fame. This year, the Virginia Birding and Wildlife Trail—the driving trail with many loops connecting to walking and hiking trails across the state—celebrates its fifth anniversary as the nation's first statewide wildlife viewing trail. Five years ago this month, officials dedicated the Piedmont Trail (13 loops) following development of the Coastal (18 loops) in 2002 and the Western (34 loops) trails in 2003.

Seeds of Economic Growth

Trails, whether wildlife- or heritage-based, are more than ends in themselves. Ted Eubanks, president and CEO of Fermata Inc., the company that has implemented trails in 21 states including Virginia, says, "If you're in economic development in the state of Virginia, you're going to highlight the quality of life because it places states like yours in an advantageous position."

A study conducted by the Conservation Management Institute and released in late 2008 formally addresses the impact of the trail on its 640,000 visitors and the many participating Virginia communities. From the thousands of people who had requested trail guides, a total of 5,000 individuals were randomly surveyed by mail and 30,439 by email as part of the study. From that sample, 772 of those mailed and 1,609 of those emailed responded. The latest U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service survey, which showed an 83 percent increase in wildlife viewing trip-related expenditures from 2001-2006, nicely complements the CMI study results, available at www.dgif.virginia.gov/vbwt.

Side

Alisa Bailey, president and CEO of the Virginia Tourism Corporation—which is celebrating the 40th anniversary of the “Virginia is for Lovers” slogan this year—says, “Birding travelers certainly fit our present campaign of connecting travelers with a love of life and a passion for travel. Our research shows that those who engage in birding stay a whopping 75 percent longer than average and spend 42 percent more than our average visitor. Having the first statewide birding and wildlife trail has helped Virginia become a leader in sustainable tourism development and eco-tourism experience. The statewide



Fishing on the Potomac River below Great Falls

Emily Pels



Manassas National Battlefield Park

Jeff Trollinger

trail is also an excellent example of state agencies and the private sector tourism industry collaborating on a comprehensive and exciting project.”

Research also shows that travelers like attractions in close proximity to one another, and the VBWT is a natural complement to heritage sites and activities such as kayaking and photography. The trail links localities from the Potomac River on the north to the John H. Kerr Reservoir (Buggs Island Lake) in the south, and from the Atlantic Ocean to South Holston Lake straddling Virginia’s western border with Tennessee. The diversity of scenic views along the way is matched only by the tremendous variety of wildlife.

DISCOVER OUR WILD SIDE



Before the VBWT, anyone interested in birding had to do what Frederick Atwood, science teacher at Flint Hill School in Fairfax County, had to do: "... look at a map and explore likely-looking roads, only to find that the roads dead-ended in private property with no access to the bodies of water I wanted to look into, sometimes after several miles of driving down a neck. This was very frustrating, especially if I was driving a van full of kids. Now, in planning a field trip for students to an area that I am unfamiliar with, I use the VBWT route as the core of the field trip. And even in places that I am quite familiar with, the distinctive brown road signs have pointed me to good birding spots that I didn't know about."

Tim Hodge, a 17-year-old ardent birder in Nelson County who considers Atwood his birding mentor, says he's seen 171 species on the Rockfish Valley Trail, a route he's covered three times in its entirety among his varied birding experiences. A birder since age nine, Hodge adds, "Birding intersects with my interest in art and

provides a good foundation for branching out into all fauna and flora in Virginia."

Branching Out

Birding travelers do branch out. Thelma Dalmas, who wrote some of the Lynchburg area copy in the Virginia Birding and Wildlife Trail guide for the Piedmont, says, "We use the guides for anything more than 25 miles from our home. I know my home plot, but I don't know the out-of-the-way places for the rest of the state. If we're going somewhere, we adjust our route to encompass more of the trail—and we know other people who do the same thing."

Even though birding can be an expensive hobby, birders are strong earners and spenders, which benefits Virginia's businesses and tax coffers. Total direct economic impact of the VBWT was estimated at \$8,638,895 per year by CMI's Encounter Survey. Median annual family income exceeded \$75,000; and greater than 72 percent of all respondents had com-



Hungry Mother State Park, Smyth County

©Dwight Dyke

Jeff Trollinger



Bullpasture River, Highland County

To order a Virginia Birding and Wildlife Trail Guide (\$8.50), go to: www.dgif.virginia.gov and click on the "Shop Online" button.

pleted at least four years of college, with more than 40 percent having earned a graduate degree.

The significance of this data cannot be overestimated because, "Just as the trail and its guides provide an incentive for people to come, local folks are more apt to support a program when they see people coming," says Allen Hale, chairman of the Nelson County Board of Supervisors, a 45-year birder, and owner of Buteo Books store.

Local as well as state officials sought to take advantage of federal funding made available: about \$1.1 million in Transportation Enhancement Grants (which had to be matched by staff and in-kind support from the Virginia Tourism Corporation and other partners), and a \$300,000 grant from the Virginia Coastal Zone Management Program. Most of the cost of the trail was in research and development; for example, site evaluations followed by publication development. With completely free access to the trail, wildlife viewers contribute significantly to the Department annually through House Bill 38, license plate sales, nongame fund contributions, and other license sales (duck stamps purchased by birders to support wetlands conservation, for example).

In the southwest Virginia town of Saltville, director of tourism Charlie Bill Totten was one of those who knew years ago that economic development could come from birding in

Jeff Trollinger



Shenandoah Mountain Range

the area. "We have the only inland saline marsh in Virginia," he says. As a result, Saltville over the years has recorded several species of birds that would normally only be found in eastern Virginia. Totten sings the praises of the Salt Trail and points to the recent resurfacing of a wooden trestle headed four miles north out of town as providing public access to "... one of the greatest blue heron rookeries on the East Coast."

Saltville businessman Brandon Gates, manager of Food Country, agrees on the economic stimulation that birding can bring. He cites the parking lot adjacent to his store where birders park and come in to buy drinks and foodstuffs.

Success stories repeat themselves on the eastern side of the state. Bruce and Carol Evans, owners of Cape Charles House Bed and Breakfast, book early every year for fall's Eastern Shore Birding Festival (Sept. 17-20, 2009), which has grown with the development of the VBWT. The Evanses pride themselves on accommodating birders year-round with very early breakfasts and with servic-

es such as arranging certified ecotour guides for the barrier islands.

People who care about economic development as well as about quality-of-life issues see birding as an activity that will expand, not only as baby boomers retire but also with the education of a younger generation. Mary Arginteanu of Richmond, member of a coalition led by Richmond Audubon, master naturalists and master gardeners, says, "Inner-city students can get as turned on to a great blue heron as kids that live in the suburbs. The birding and wildlife trail has helped us get a lot of inner-city kids outdoors. We've had Girl Scouts and Brownies on the James River Park Trail see two owls being mobbed by a blue-gray gnatcatcher—and that was exciting!"

Arginteanu had a letter from a grateful scout leader for what the coalition had done for "her girls." "Once you get the kids out there, they just love being nature detectives," Arginteanu adds.

At least one locality, however, has found it challenging to market its section of the VBWT. Roger Mayhorn of

Buchanan says their part of the trail appears to be used almost exclusively by locals. "Occasionally, when we are leading a bird walk with our own group on a section of the trail, we'll get a birder or two who have seen our outing posted on our listserv and will come to join us—but that is the extent of it."

In an attempt to attract more birders, Buchanan is promoting its annual Coalfields Folk Life Festival, which includes guided bird walks, more heavily each year.

As for the trail's future, David Whitehurst, director, Wildlife Resources Bureau, says, "We know that no one agency, one locality, or one person is ever going to accomplish the monumental task of heightening awareness and use of the trail. Only by increasing partnerships among all of the entities involved can we secure the success of the trail for the next five—the next fifty—years." □

An Accomack County native, Martha W. Steger is a Midlothian-based, freelance writer and editor who spent 25 years as director of public relations for the Virginia Tourism Corporation.

Jeff Trollinger



Mountain Lake, Giles County